



School Libraries and the Social Order

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THE VERY NATURE of the social order in this country may be shaped in large measure by the character of the libraries or by the lack of libraries in schools. The salvation or destruction of our society may hinge on what people do about communications. Never before has society, the good society, required of its individuals so wide a range of knowledge. For this knowledge, for the building of truth and perspective, for the shaping of ideas and attitudes, most individuals will depend primarily on communications of one kind or another. Yet never before has society so inundated its people with communications of all types. These circumstances add a note of urgency to the necessity that the schools meet two fundamental requirements of a good school program that have too frequently been neglected—providing elementary and secondary schools with the wide range of books and other materials that youth needs for the acquisition of sound ideas and information, and educating children and young people in the ways of interpreting, evaluating, and using books and other materials of communication. The school library forms a vital and basic part in these two important aspects of the good school program.

A belief in the school library represents the belief in the right of every boy and girl to have the pleasures, the understandings, and the experiences that come from sharing the best in the recorded impressions and expressions of mankind. The school library thus constitutes a social instrument of far-reaching significance, for it symbolizes the sources of ideas and information, inspirations and pleasures upon which a true education depends. Education in a democracy requires the resources and services of school libraries; the philosophy of democracy maintains the right of every boy and girl to have these resources and services. Although such principles receive the vigorous

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support of many people connected in one way or another with the education of youth, they are also totally ignored or overlooked or rejected by many others.

It is important that the concept of the school library as a potent social force be understood and interpreted in relation to its complete context. Actually the place of the school library in the social order depends upon and reflects the place of the school in the social order, and a description of the former must assume an understanding of the latter. The school library, being an integral part of the school, cannot be dissociated from that school in any account of its status in society. Furthermore, the worth of the education of our youth essentially determines the worth of our social order. Why then isolate the school library for particular mention as an agency capable of affecting significantly the nature of the social order? The answer is that the objectives of education cannot be achieved without the resources of a library, and that, in a very real sense, the nature and extent of the ideas that young people obtain in school are immeasurably influenced by the nature and extent of the library resources in the school. Such time-worn slogans as "the library is the heart of the school" and "the library is the textbook of the school" imply more than a surface meaning; nor is it without significance that these phrases were first advanced by school administrators.

It is possible to develop this subject of the school library and the social order in highly positive terms, which describe in detail the objectives and functions of school library service in the education of youth, how these affect youth, and hence how they affect the social order. The truth confronts us, however, that the literature of school librarianship, both by direct statement and by obvious implication, teems with accounts of the objectives and the functions of school library service. It seems pointless to repeat the principles and practices of school library service. The paramount issue becomes one of appraising how well the objectives have been achieved and of determining what yet remains to be done. The basic descriptive literature in the field has now been with us for some time; collectively long enough so that we cannot seek solace in the rationalization that a substantial time lag inevitably occurs between the introduction of ideas and their translation into action. Almost ten years have elapsed since the publication of one of the most "recent" major documents—*School Libraries for Today and Tomorrow*,¹ generally accepted as the statement of national standards and objectives for school libraries. This

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volume has the dubious distinction of being completely out of date in some respects (expenditures, for example), and of being regarded on a widespread scale as too visionary and with standards preposterously high (expenditures again) for achievement.

The current status of school libraries provides one insight into the disposition of the social order: judging by the total picture of what we find in our schools and particularly in our elementary schools, our nation evidently does not attach very much importance to books and other materials of communication. One seeks in vain to find a rationale for this apparent apathy; one finds only paradoxes. High values are attached to the place of good schools in society, to the importance of having a literate society, and to the role of reading. No one denies the importance of using a wide range of printed and audio-visual materials in the school today. The achievement of the objectives of good elementary and secondary school curricula depends upon such materials being readily accessible to teachers and students in the school. No one denies the importance of educating the youth of our country in the ways of using, interpreting, and evaluating materials—not only for immediate purposes while they are still in school but also so that they will know how to use materials effectively and intelligently when they leave school. No one denies that reading abilities and reading habits may be shaped in large measure by the extent and nature of the printed materials easily available for boys and girls. No one can deny, either, that, in the over-all view, little more than lip service has been accorded these principles in our schools.

The time is long overdue for a vigorous program of action on the part of all those concerned with the education of youth—school administrators, teachers, librarians, parents, and others—to provide all boys and girls in our schools with library service. Despite the encouraging developments in the last ten years in both the quantity and quality of school libraries, we have no grounds for complacency.

The school library is not a luxury item, and yet it frequently has been considered and treated as that. No school having an enrollment of two hundred or more pupils can afford to be without a library and the services that go with it. It seems fantastic therefore that in thousands of schools in our country pleas, briefs, and persuasions must be advanced to convince the authorities that the school needs a wide range of books and other materials. In innumerable places the chances are greater for finding good athletic equipment and good band equipment than for finding good libraries.

Mention has already been made of the urgent need that the members of our society be well-informed. It would be foolish to maintain, in these days of swift change, that an enduring background of accurate information can be taught the child or the youth while in school. Geography, science, and many other phases of knowledge are subject to change. An awareness of this, however, can and should be assimilated by pupils. Young people must have accurate information for a true interpretation and understanding of the world today, a world in which they are vitally interested and of which they form an active part. Some of it will hold true for all of their lives; most of it will be useful in one way or another. To provide the books and other communications that contain it, schools must have the resources of the school library. Teachers and textbooks, no matter how good, cannot alone supply it; nor are classroom collections of books alone sufficient. Good teaching motivates students to use a wide range of materials. The point seems too obvious to labor, yet the inaccessibility of materials in the schools of this country shows that the axiom has not been translated into action on any widespread scale. One does not have to travel far before reaching an elementary school which contains no material on the United Nations, or on many scientific subjects, or on countries other than the United States, or on numerous other basic topics; nor does one have to travel far to find schools which have some books on these subjects, but books so woefully out of date or so erroneous in concept that their complete absence would be preferable. The same is true of imaginative literature.

Every school building with two hundred or more students needs a school library and school library service. This means a well-balanced collection of appropriate books and other materials, a good school librarian, and a dynamic program of library service for students and teachers. No compromise, even with the overcrowded conditions of the schools, can be justified concerning this provision of a library in every school of the population named. Although it is eminently desirable, and recommended by national school library standards, that there be a full-time librarian in schools with less than five hundred students, schools of this size may have only a librarian who teaches half-time or who gives half-time library service to each of two schools of this size.

Even though many of the smaller high schools and twelve-grade schools do not today have libraries, the provision of libraries in elementary schools is the development most needed. It is in fact one

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of the most necessary educational improvements facing the country, for despite an increase in such libraries, the elementary school having one remains the exception rather than the rule. Classroom collections of books in no sense constitute an adequate substitute for a school library, either in terms of the wide range of materials which boys and girls of all ages need and want, or of economy. Modern schools require both a library and classroom collections, with the collection of books in the classroom being essentially mobile collections coming from the school library.

Boards of education must assume the responsibility for providing libraries in the schools. Such responsibility means not only that the board of education conscientiously works for the provision of libraries in the schools, but also that it accepts its obligation for administering and financing these libraries. For most school library situations this responsibility has been fully met by the boards of education, but numerous exceptions may still be found. For example, some school boards rely on public libraries to furnish library services which should be furnished by the board of education. The public library should not be expected to provide books and library services in the schools; this is not a rightful function of the public library, and even under the best of circumstances it carries serious handicaps for a truly functional school library program. Nor should the Parent-Teachers Association bear responsibility for raising funds for the school library, or for running the school library. The Parent-Teachers Association can be, and very frequently is, a most effective agency for motivating school authorities to provide libraries in the schools. If the Parent-Teachers Association wants to make a donation to the school library, that donation should be over and above the amount allocated by the school, which at least should meet minimum state or regional standards for school library expenditures. Not until the schools have adequate library materials and services will books and other materials of communication really be accessible to youth; this statement, of course, excludes television, radio, commercial films, and some mass media of print.

Needless to say, the materials in libraries should be good materials. The cheap, the false, and the mediocre have no place in the schools. The current concern about young people who can't or won't read has frequently resulted in the selection of inferior books. No mediocre book has ever met a reading need or interest better than a good book, and good books of all kinds exist in abundance for young people today.

Getting the child or young person to read something, no matter what that something may be, just for the sake of reading, is fallacious and dangerous, and fails to justify the process of reading as an end in itself. To read anything may not necessarily be better than reading nothing. Another erroneous and unsafe theory in the selection of books and other materials for youth can be detected in some communities—too many instances have been revealed recently where bigoted censorship has been exercised and certain books, magazines, and films recommended in standard lists for school libraries, have been banned. This theory follows the hazardous proposition that ignorance can only be fought with ignorance. Librarians and teachers must have freedom to select the best materials for their schools, and pressure groups outside must not have the power to dictate what books and other materials should or should not go into the school.

For many school administrators, teachers, parents, and others, the library needs of schools require neither briefs nor persuasion. To them and to school librarians the program proposed in the preceding paragraphs, forms no more than what it is—a plan of action urgently and critically needed, but still a minimum. In due time perhaps other parts of the library picture will be improved, and in due time perhaps the objectives and standards of the school library will be completely realized. Historical tradition and accident have been the primary causes for some school library conditions which no longer are suited to the purposes of the modern school, such as the lack of sufficient space and staff in schools having one thousand or more students. As emphasizing this lag in school library development, compare college libraries with school libraries in institutions having the same number of students, keeping in mind that the school library has more demands for service to faculty and students than the college library. Other conditions are the burden of clerical and technical tasks that limits the librarian's time for the pursuit of true school library work with teachers and students; and the existence in many schools of two separate and uncoordinated libraries—the library of audio-visual materials and that of printed materials.

Further instances of outmoded principle or practice could be added. The great dilemma among school librarians today is how to break the circle. A live library program, putting into operation the stated objectives and functions of school library service, would convince the schools of the wisdom and desirability of providing adequate school library facilities, but this usually cannot be demonstrated without

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adequate facilities. One might reason that the climate of a new age might gradually eradicate the antiquated machinery of school libraries, and that modern curricula and teaching methods would render such changes inevitable. The trends of the last quarter, however, do not make one very sanguine, no matter how long and gratefully and hopefully one looks at noticeable improvements in school library development.

It seems certain that school librarians have been talking to themselves too long. The observations in these pages are well-known to school librarians, and they have frequently been noted in the literature and professional meetings of school librarians. In the last analysis, the program for the preparation of teachers may well provide the impetus that is needed. In addition to courses that acquaint prospective teachers with good books and other materials for children and young people, the teacher-training program should include the provision that prospective teachers become familiar with the services of a good school library. Today the chances are high that the prospective teacher will be graduated with little or no familiarity with books for youth or with other materials of communication for youth; the chances are strong that the teacher-training agency will have no collection of children's books, or at best a pitifully inadequate and haphazard collection. The school library functions to the extent that the teachers motivate its use; such stimulation will be quickened and the demand for good libraries in schools will be accelerated when teachers become familiar with the resources and services of a good school library.

To plead vigorously for good libraries in our schools seems a strange anomaly for our times; one does not have to plead for gadgets, for equipment, for hot lunches—why for books? Why does the long loud wailing about the non-reading adult population and about the reading difficulties of youth seldom include a concern that some of these conditions might presumably be due to an absence of good libraries in the schools, particularly elementary schools? If we believe in a society of wise and good men, how can we afford to deprive our youth of the books and other materials that help to build wisdom and goodness? The following seems pertinent here:

The concept that men can catch a vision of tomorrow's world and that they can pursue a course of action which will, in some degree, shape the future to their will is what makes education in our day an important instrument of social progress. It is perhaps not too much to say that, for this and the next generation, the most important obli-

gation of our schools and colleges is to equip our youth with the values, the motivations, knowledge, and intelligence they will need in working out co-operatively the design of a better world. In some way we shall have to provide youth with the experiences that will enable them to comprehend the moving forces of their day, that will enable them so to order and understand the world of human relationships of their time that they will not be lost in it or seek to escape from it.²

The writer submits that for the building of these values, these motivations, this knowledge, and this intelligence our schools must have good libraries.

References

1. American Library Association. Committee on Post-War Planning: *School Libraries for Today and Tomorrow; Functions and Standards*. (Planning for Libraries No. 5) Chicago, The Association, 1945.
2. Edwards, N.: Education as a Social Instrument. *School Review*, 59:394-402, Oct. 1951.